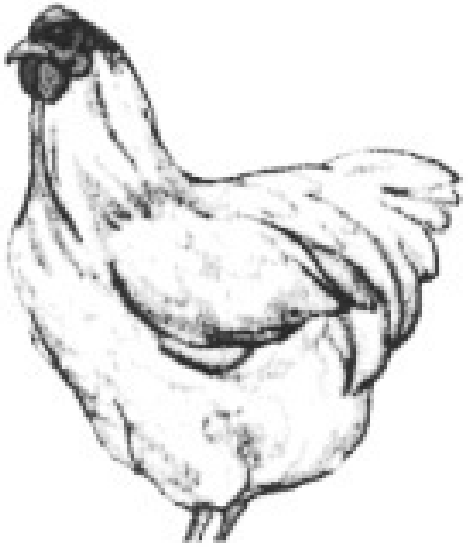
Clear Communication

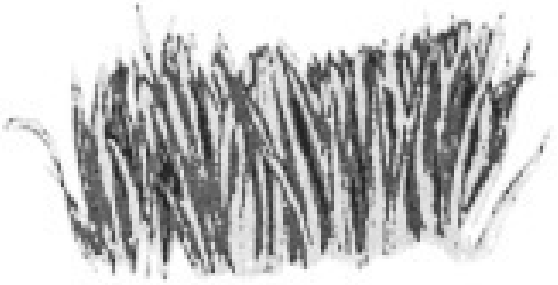
Study Abroad Training

Douglas Perkins

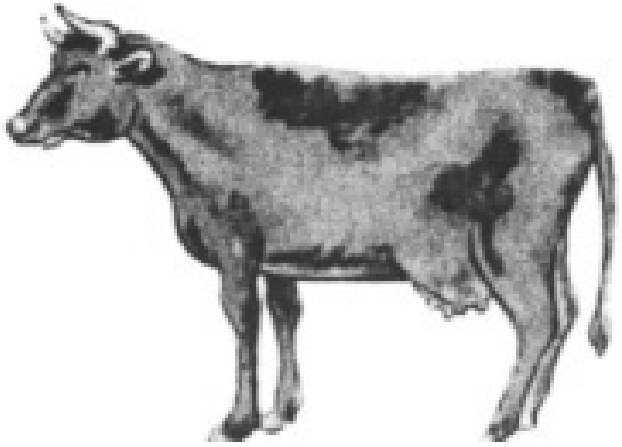
2018–2025



A



B

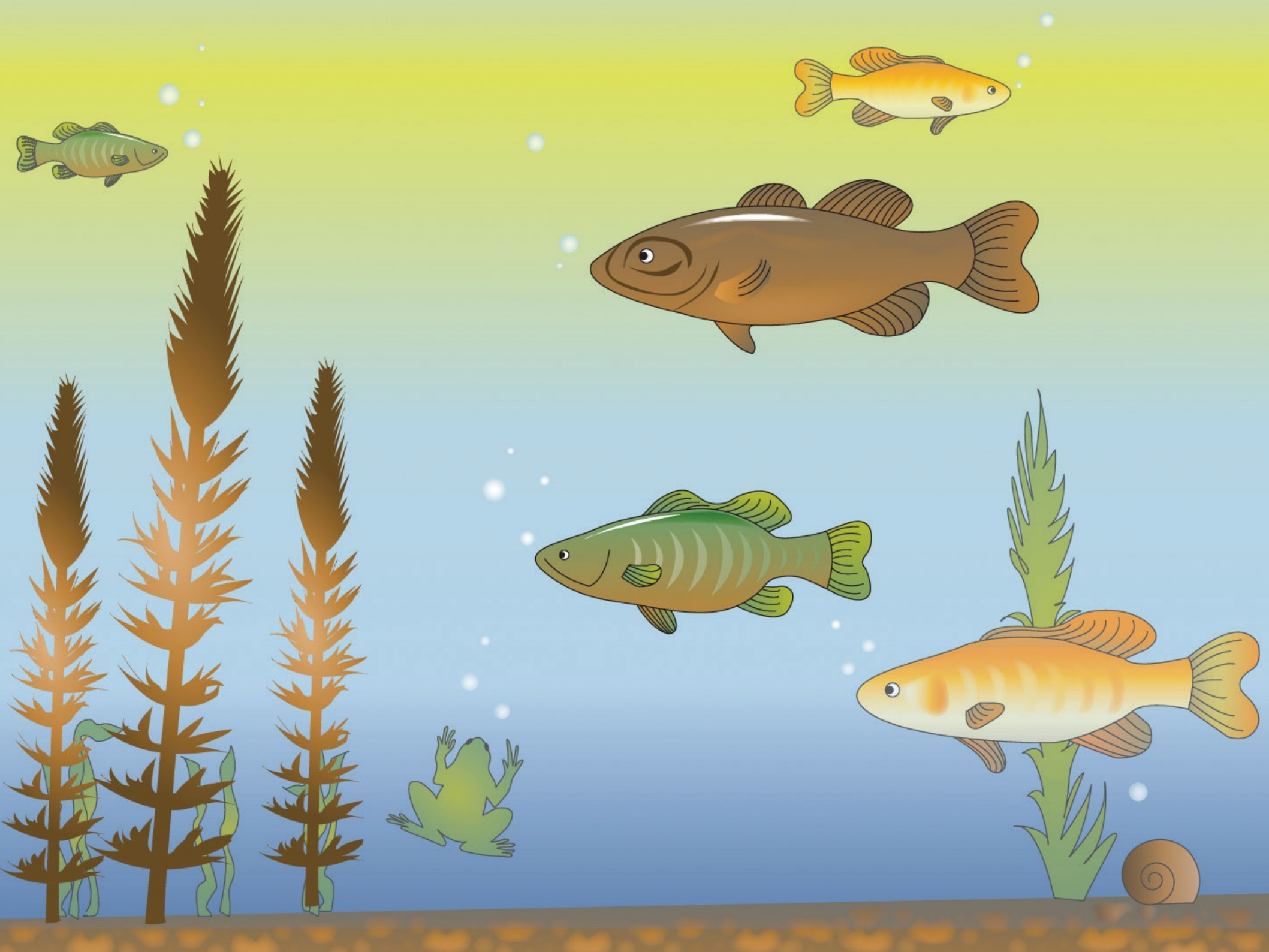


What goes with this? A or B

If you were to place two objects together, which would they be? Why do those seem to be the ones that belong together? If you're a Westerner, odds are you think the chicken and the cow belong together. Developmental psychologist Liang-hwang Chiu showed triplets like that in the illustration to American and Chinese children. Chiu found that the American children preferred to group objects because they belonged to the "taxonomic" category, that is, the same classification term could be applied to both ("adults," "tools"). Chinese children preferred to group objects on the basis of relationships. They would be more likely to say the cow and the grass in the illustration go together because "the cow eats the grass."

– **The Geography of Thought**, Ch. 8.
Richard Nisbett

Describe the picture.
What do you see?
Say it out loud.



Americans and Japanese made about an equal number of references to the focal fish, but the Japanese made more than 60 percent more references to background elements, including the water, rocks, bubbles, and inert plants and animals. In addition, whereas Japanese and American participants made about equal numbers of references to movement involving active animals, the Japanese participants made almost twice as many references to relationships involving inert, background objects. Perhaps most tellingly, the very first sentence from the Japanese participants was likely to be one referring to the environment (“It looked like a pond”), whereas the first sentence from Americans was three times as likely to be one referring to the focal fish (“There was a big fish, maybe a trout, moving off to the left”).

– **The Geography of Thought**, Ch. 4.
Richard Nisbett

Take a picture of one classmate.
Right now.

In a second study, Americans and Japanese were asked to “take a photo of a person.” The Americans most frequently took a close-up, showing all the features of the person’s face, while the Japanese showed the person in his or her environment instead, with the human figure quite small in relationship to the background…

Notice the common pattern in all three studies. The Americans focus on individual figures separate from their environment, while the Asians give more attention to backgrounds and to the links between these backgrounds and the central figures.

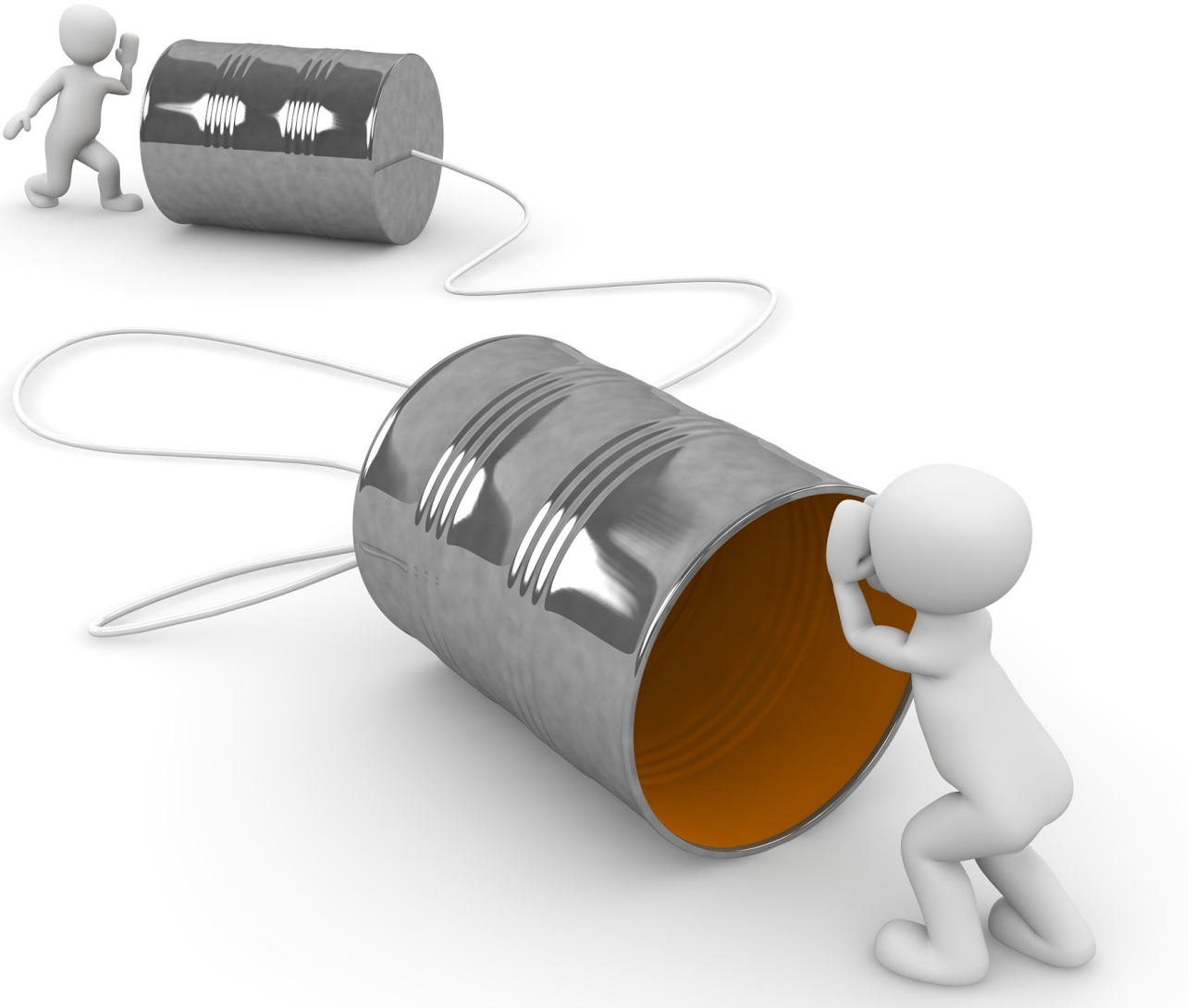
– **The Culture Map**, Ch. 3.
Erin Meyer

Sometimes you thought you communicated clearly, but the other person didn’t get the message.

This often happens with quick reactions.

Sometimes this is cultural.

In each example, what is the speaker's message?



A Japanese school

At school one day in early April, a Japanese teacher approaches an ALT wearing a short-sleeve shirt and asks, “Aren’t you cold?”

An Arabic friend’s house

You are visiting a friend at his house.
He says, “Do you want some coffee?”
You agree, and he looks surprised.

An American company

Your boss says, “Yesterday, you did a very good job with your speech. Your writing was great, too. However, your charts and graphs were a little confusing.”

Communication:
High context vs. low context

In anthropology, high-context culture and low-context culture is a measure of how explicit the messages exchanged in a culture are, and how important the context is in communication. High and low context cultures fall on a continuum that describes how a person communicates with others through their range of communication abilities: utilizing gestures, relations, body language, verbal messages, or non-verbal messages. These concepts were first introduced by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture*.

– Wikipedia

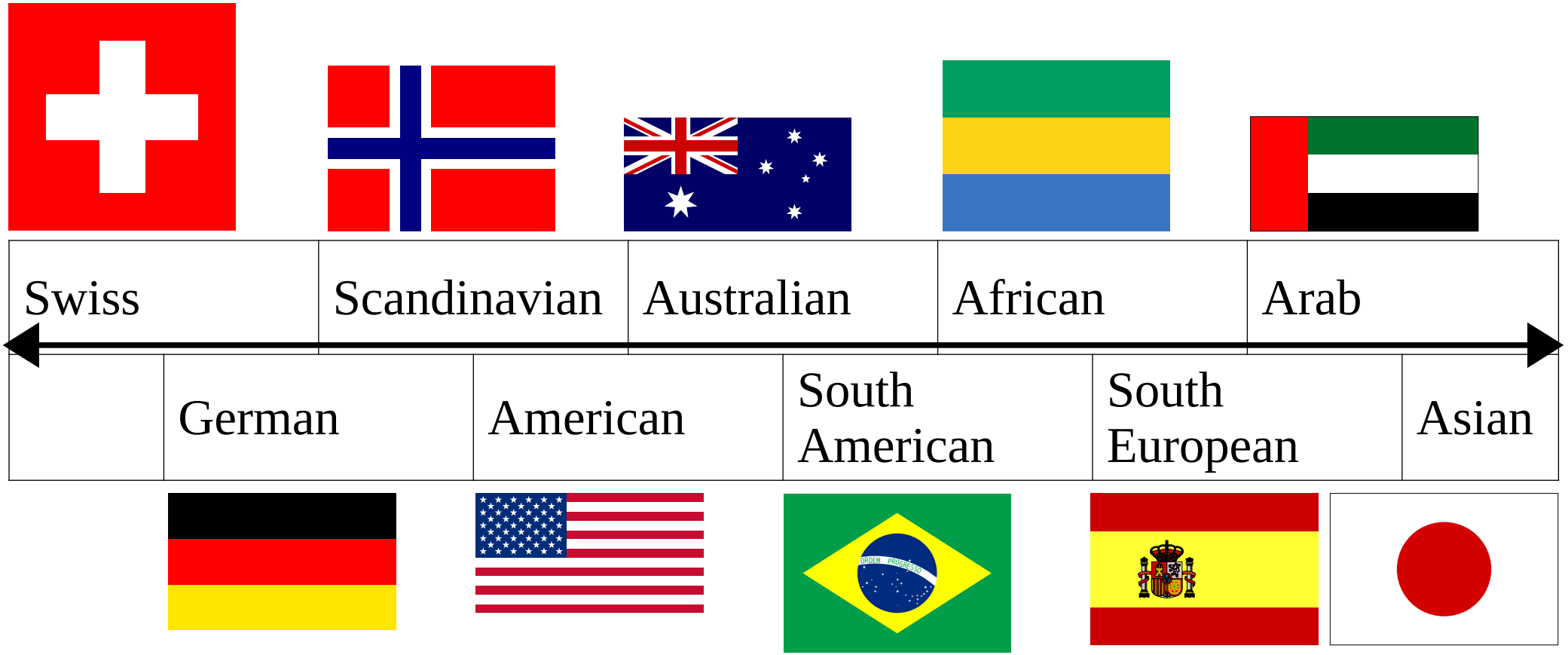
Low context

- Direct messages.
- More spoken information.
- Rules on paper.
- Focus on the thing to do.
- More individual action.

High context

- Indirect messages.
- Lots of non-verbal information.
- More customs, fewer rules.
- Focus on the relationship.
- More group action.

Context by country



Which are low-context?

1.	It is cold today. Could you shut the window, please?
2.	Absolutely right! That is possible.
3.	I think before I speak. I always say what I think.
4.	I earn 5,000 dollars a week. I earn enough to keep my family happy.
5.	We will find a way. Everything is in the contract.

Surprising Stories

Each situation has a communication problem. What might have happened?

1.

A father says to his daughter, “If you have time this afternoon, would you clean your room?”

Later, the father yells at his daughter.

2.

Amy and Yuki are chatting on Facebook. Amy writes, “Hey Yuki, did you see Alex’s new sweater? It’s so amazingly cute.”

Yuki gets angry with Amy.

3.

Bob is the leader at a meeting. He talks for five minutes and then pauses for questions. Nobody asks any, so he continues to talk.

His coworkers feel ignored.

4.

Cathy and Dave are classmates. After school, Cathy emails Dave. She writes, “In class today, when you told Mr. Johnson his class was boring, wow. That was crazy, man!”

Dave gets angry with Cathy.

5.

Kim and James are coworkers. Kim walks over to James's desk and asks, "Did you finish making the tax document?"

James gets nervous and depressed.

Communication Reading

If a teacher were to make a mistake, would you tell them? Why?

(Doug) This happened back in high school. I was really bored in U.S. History class, and the teacher somehow started talking about chess. I like to play chess, you see, and he was talking about the number of squares on the board. Whatever he said was wrong, and in a sleepy voice, I said, “There are sixty-four squares.” and zonked out again. Everyone laughed, so perhaps it was funny? Who can say. I didn’t learn much in that class, anyway.

Do you think people should communicate more directly? Why?

(Jimbo) Yeah, I sure do. There are plenty of companies who mistreat their employees by not actually writing down the company rules. If we knew what our jobs specifically were, we could work faster and smarter. Also, if it were on paper and things were wrong, we could point to them and say, “No, this is not good. We need to fix this.” Transparency is usually good for employees, and it’s always bad for bad bosses.

If your neighbor were noisy every night, what would you do?

(Richie) Growing up, sometimes I played video games too loud at night. Our neighbor just banged on the walls, and that was the cue to turn the volume down. I think that's the simplest way, because if there's a problem now, you can solve it now. But some neighbors don't care and they keep making noise. Then you have to call the landlord.

Write about a time when you tried to send an indirect message to someone and they didn't get the message.

(Dex) Well, the university president was trying to increase class sizes to save money on faculty. I sent him an email saying, "Dick, you know smaller class sizes are linked to higher learning." He replied but didn't realize what I meant. As Upton Sinclair said, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it."

Communication Writing

Answer 4+ questions.

1. When you speak to your friends, are you direct or indirect? For example…
2. When you speak to your teachers, are you direct or indirect? For example…
3. Describe a time when you sent an indirect message to someone and they didn’t understand it.
4. Do you think people should communicate more directly? Why?
5. If your neighbor were noisy every night, what would you do?
6. If a teacher were to make a mistake, would you tell them? Why?
7. If a classmate suggested an activity that you didn’t think would be fun, how would you reply?

See Also

- **The Culture Map**. Erin Meyer. 2014.
- **The Geography of Thought**. Richard Nisbett. 2004.
- Cultural Dimensions Test. IDRLabs.com. 2023.